

A night cityscape with a red and blue grid overlay. The background shows illuminated buildings and streetlights. The title '觀光客' is written in large white characters, and 'TOURIST' is written in smaller white characters below it. The name 'MARK WADLEY' is written in white characters at the bottom right.

觀光客

T O U R I S T

MARK WADLEY



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"If light is scarce, then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty. But the progressive Westerner is determined always to better his lot. From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light—his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even the minutest shadow."

Junichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*

"It's not just the meaning of the image that has changed—the act of looking does not have the same meaning."

Wim Wenders





I
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I wanted to be savvy, culturally aware, not another white gawker standing in the wrong place at the train station. But I could never escape that simple fact, blundering wide-eyed into a country where I had never been, didn't speak the language, and would, inevitably, show my dumb ass.

I visited Japan as a tourist and observed its places and people through a tourist's lens – an old Minolta point-and-shoot, designed specifically as a low-effort travel camera with a zoom lens, auto exposure and built-in flash. To avoid the deleterious effects of airport x-ray scanners, I bought, shot and developed a few rolls of cheap consumer-grade film in the week I spent there, the snapshot-sized scans showing up in my email over the first week back in America – dispatches from the vacation dreamworld materializing into my disappointing waking life.

The scans are suitable for 4x6 prints – just like the old days – but when scaled up reveal dense grain and, in harsh contrast to their original analog nature, digital artifactual. This is an imperfect view through an imperfect lens, a hazy memory of tiled store fronts and throngs of people. And that's all I've got; unable to go back to the original negatives, long since disposed somewhere in Ebisu, the amount of control I have over these images is miniscule in comparison to the high-res shots that still live on my digital camera. But that loss of control is a truer representation of my time in Japan – a fleeting memory of a beautiful, foreign place.

I photographed Japan not as documentary but as memento,

these images more a reflection of my experience as a temporary, enthusiastic interloper than a study of the place and its people. The Japanese word 観光客 (*kankōkyaku*, tourist) comprises three kanji that can be individually translated as *look - light - visitor*. I know next to nothing about Japanese etymology, but the word itself strikes me as a startlingly clear depiction of *me*, photographing a Shinjuku side street – a visitor looking for light.

As a stranger in a strange land, bereft of language, communication reduced to its most basic form, the tourist has a tendency to reduce the people around them to furniture. There's a complex history of western artists going to Japan and creating art inspired by the country and culture, which often participates in that same aesthetic flattening. Does my work transcend that? Probably not. But by resolving to make these images the way I do at home, letting the environment shape the work rather than modifying my process to create "Japan" photography, I hope that I have better captured the rapt feeling of being a tourist, in awe of the strange everydayness continually revealing itself.


Back home, I tend to avoid photographing people on the street, concerned with the personal politics of consent

and self-image. As such, much of my work presents man-made spaces as ominous, evacuated – human traces without bodies, oblique concrete slowly dismantled by light and flora. Americans are wary of a man with a camera; the Japanese ignored me entirely. That made it easier to include them as welcome intruders inside the Minolta's frame lines. They give life to towering architecture, urban greenery and hard-edged shadow – living, breathing context, their relationship to their environment closer to symbiosis than imposition. Similarly, my work was changed by this new context – my typical preoccupation with alienation and decay transformed by the people, the imperfect and irretrievable film, the dual filters of language and memory. The novelty of the experience provides a new perspective on the mundane.

I very much appreciate the country of Japan and its tremendously hospitable people for facilitating this experience, however indirectly. I hope these people and places feel real, tangible and vital, even clumsily captured as they are here, by one grateful *kankōkyaku*.

Mark Wadley
November 2024





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MARK WADLEY lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland. His photography and writing have been featured in *Apocalypse Confidential* and *scaffold*, among others. He is the editor of *BRUISER*.



"A psychogeographic view through the lens of a cheap camera, giving a realistic look at a country that has been exoticized far too often. Glimpses of flora, concrete and steel show the familiar to the man who is unfamiliar."

Tully K, *Apocalypse Confidential*

"We forget the flaneur, the only type of person who can take these images, whose wandering is in union with curiosity. A bewildered stare at a sign in an unknown language may be the act of a tourist, but finding enough merit in its design to commit it to film and share it is not."

Cole Wheeler, WYXR's *Life on Deck*

"These faded images and hazy lights evoke the fleeting nature of travel—moments that feel familiar yet distant, like fragments of a memory shaped as much by films and anime as by lived experience. It's a reflection of a trip where the lines between the real and the imagined dissolve."

Sam Levin, @goopcat

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